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World Chronicle

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ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Elizabeth DOWDESWELL, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), discusses the current status of environmental issues. Land-based human activities and industrial waste are the main sources of marine degradation. Poverty is an additional factor in the deterioration of our environment in general. UNEP mobilizes public awareness and brings governments together to find solutions for world environmental problems. The most pressing of these are climate change, water pollution and land desertification.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Today, the bulk of the world's population lives in coastal areas, and there's a continuing trend towards its concentration in those regions. This phenomenon has put our marine environment under increasing stress. Population densities, industrial growth and development activities in general have adverse effects on a variety of coastal ecosystems. What can be done to stop the marine degradation caused by these land-based activities?

With us today is the most senior United Nations official concerned with environmental issues. She is Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, or UNEP. Joining me to talk with Ms. Dowdeswell are Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International and Linda Fasulo of NBC News.

Ms. Dowdeswell, welcome to World Chronicle.

Ms. Dowdeswell, before we get into the question of the marine environment, I'd like to ask you a general question about environmentalism. Do you feel that perhaps there's less interest in environmental problems now than there used to be? There seems to be a trend in some governments, in the United States for example, to deregulate and to put environmental concerns somewhere in the background, particularly if they conflict with the interests of big business. Is this a world-wide phenomenon in the industrial countries?

DOWDESWELL: I think the matter of environmental issues has a life cycle, if you like. And I think from time to time it is of lesser importance to countries. My feeling is, however, that it will never again drop off the top ten issues that are on the pole. Certainly at times of economic restraint we find that environmental issues often take a back seat. But very quickly the public at large demands that issues of health and safety and ultimately of patterns of development depend on a safe and healthy environment.

LITTLEJOHNS: You're from Canada. Is there still a good deal of interest in ecological questions in Canada?

DOWDESWELL: I believe so, although I've been living in Africa for the last several years, and so I don't experience it on a daily basis. But I think in most countries there is still a healthy interest in environment, perhaps not as much as there was in its heyday five or even ten years ago.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about Africa, for instance? I mean, when the first environment conference was held in Stockholm in -- '74, was it? -- the feeling among many developing countries was that somehow or other this was a problem for the industrialized North and not for the developing South. Is that still the feeling?

DOWDESWELL: No. In fact, I think that many developing countries are not understanding that their future development is very much linked to what they do with their environments. Certainly issues of desertification and issues of the management of water resources are very much on the minds of people in the South, as is the issue of biodiversity.

NGUYEN: Ms. Dowdeswell, where are the biggest threats to the marine environment? Are they from the big industries or human activities? By that I mean the daily activities of the people living near the sea or a river mouth. What threatens the marine environment?

DOWDESWELL: Interestingly, it is in fact human activities overwhelmingly that present the problem. Something like 80 per cent of the pollution in the oceans comes from land-based activities. If I can give you an example, about .1 million tons of pollution come from offshore activities, whereas 1 million tons would come from something like the discharge of sewage systems.

NGUYEN: What about big cities like New York City? A big city like Hong Kong or Singapore? Are they in better shape than, you know, coastal -- I mean, islands, for example, where they live surrounded by the sea? Are they the biggest threat? Are those big cities a bigger threat than those islands surrounded by the sea?

DOWDESWELL: Certainly big cities, their population, the industrial growth, are very important polluting factors; but as well those small island states that are now starting to depend on tourism for development are realizing the impact of human activity in their areas. This is one of the most interesting interdependent kinds of issues, inter-connected issues, because the causes of oceanic pollution range all the way from agricultural run-off to the problems of population growth and how one deals with sewage treatment to such things as tourism.

FASULO: Has much progress been made in terms of developing cleaner technology or better ways of dealing with this kind of pollution?

DOWDESWELL: I think there are responses that are encouraging, both in terms of the policies that governments, and municipal governments in particular, are taking, as well as the kinds of technologies. Certainly we know the technologies exist; it's often that they're not in the right place at the right time. That's why a global mechanism to be able to make sure that the financial resources, the technological resources are where they need to be is important. But it isn't just an issue of concern to the developing world. There are parts of many developed countries where primary, secondary and even tertiary sewage treatment, for example, are not in place.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about the problem of ocean dumping? Is that very serious now, or has that been reduced somewhat?

DOWDESWELL: Ocean dumping remains a concern, but there are guidelines in place, there are mechanisms to monitor what's going on. We have a much better idea now of what's happening with ocean dumping. I think much more worrisome is the run-off of agricultural pesticides, those things that are carried by the atmosphere and dumped in the ocean. We're just beginning to understand the impact of those kinds of threats to the ocean.

LITTLEJOHNS: But that's mainly in the coastal areas, isn't it, rather than the far-out ocean?

DOWDESWELL: Yes, it's particularly the coastal areas, but that's what we are primarily concerned about, because that happens to be the area that is going to be the source of much of our food, even now, but in the coming times as well. The coastal areas are where man, human beings, depend upon their livelihood, they require a sustainable environment, and yet it is humans that can do the most damage in those coastal areas, not so much the open ocean, if you like.

NGUYEN: When you talk about man-made activities, is there a classification of the results of those man-made activities? I'm talking about, let's say, are the industries more responsible for the pollution of the marine life than the daily life of the citizen living by the sea?

DOWDESWELL: I think it's a combination. It's the daily life, it's people's habits, what they throw in the water, what they discharge by way of human activities, agriculture, forestry, as well as industrial pollution.

NGUYEN: Yes, but you can control industrial activities, but you cannot control the daily life of the people.

DOWDESWELL: Well, you can't control, but one of the important things you can do is to make people aware of the impact of what they're doing on the coastal area. And certainly the dumping of physical garbage many municipal governments can control.

NGUYEN: I want to ask you also, you see, coastal areas, they're more concerned about natural disasters which destroy beaches, housing and big cities. Do you think your programme, trying to save the marine environment, is a bigger programme than the programme to save the coastal environment, the beaches and the beauty of those islands, where they are more concerned about this than really saving the marine environment, which is far away from the population?

DOWDESWELL: Well, certainly disasters always draw to people's attention in a most violent and dramatic way what impact human beings are having on their environment. But I do believe that people are concerned about more than simply the aesthetic and the value of their property. They are concerned about the health of human beings; they are

concerned about having enough food to eat. And we have too many cases where the fisheries, for example, have declined because of direct human activity.

FASULO: Can you talk a little bit on the subject about the linkage of poverty and environmental degradation?

DOWDESWELL: Well, it is very clear that in some parts of the world people who are very, very poor don't think a great deal about concerning themselves with the environment. They may have to use the last of their seed corn, they may have to cut down the last tree for an energy source. That isn't what concerns them most. And so the poorest are often polluters in that sense, they're degraders of the environment, but equally a degraded environment is also not conducive to sustainable growth and development of individuals, or a healthy lifestyle. Those parts of the world where soil erosion has taken place, where we have depleted the nutritional value of the soil, where we have cut down forests, are areas in which we find people eking out a mere subsistence.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Dowdeswell, there was a rather distressing report in *The New York Times* the other day that in Brazil the Amazon rain forests are being burned again just as they were being burned before the Rio summit conference. What can UNEP do to address that kind of situation, to make the people responsible for these things realize the great damage they're doing to the whole world, in effect?

DOWDESWELL: Well, one of the reasons we have a United Nations Environment Programme is because most countries recognize that these environmental problems were much greater than the ability of any one country to solve. I think there are several things that can be done. The first one is to be a source of public awareness. One of the things that we do is make these problems known around the world. Based on sound scientific evidence, we draw that to the attention of governments and their citizens. The second thing that we do, however, is to be able to bring governments together, such as we're doing on the land-based activities question, to actually find solutions. And the combination of peer pressure, of mobilizing action, and of holding governments to account is a very important role. By setting milestones, for example, by having governments know that there is going to be a forum in which they will report back is usually some incentive for action to be taken domestically.

NGUYEN: And which area of the world now is more threatened than others? I'm talking about the marine environment. Is there -- can you pinpoint some area in the world where that problem is more acute?

DOWDESWELL: I would think that there are two areas that are acute: The first one would be those areas where there are large mega-cities, large populations developing, particularly in cities in the South. I believe that urbanization's going to be a significant

problem for a time to come. And the second one I would point to are small islands, where coral reefs are being damaged, and where the whole basis of future growth is at risk because of pollution.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme.

NGUYEN: Are those countries in southeast Asia or in north Asia, who are now called tigers or dragons or whatever because of their booming economies, are they really a threat also to the marine environment?

DOWDESWELL: Well, the countries in southeast Asia in fact are among those who are most concerned about marine pollution and who are very actively pursuing patterns of development that are environmentally conscious. I think, for example, of our discussions with some aspects of the tourism industry -- the service industry, the hotels, are very concerned about making sure that their actions are not going to be short-lived, that they are in fact going to result in a long-term presence for tourism and development over the next few years.

FASULO: What are some of the biggest problems -- looking here, here we are in New York -- in terms of the waters surrounding the United Nations, or North America? Are they in very bad shape, or -- how do things stand?

DOWDESWELL: Well, in certain parts of the country they are in bad shape. They're in bad shape as evidenced by the decline in the fisheries, for one thing. They're in bad shape when you see the garbage that is washed up on the beaches, when you look at the number of beaches that are closed for swimming, for example. But I think there's also an unseen pollution that we just don't know yet how bad it is -- the emerging issue of persistent organic pollutants, which is essentially the pollutants that come from pesticides, for example; from plastics, we're just starting to see medical evidence that would show a potential for their impact upon reproductive organs. We already have places in the world where we find birds that are malformed, where we find eggshells that are thinner than they should be. And there is a great deal of worry that ultimately this will come up the food chain, and it won't be long before we see the impact upon human beings.

FASULO: And regarding oil spills, how is that? For a while we heard about very terrible oil spills. Are there better ways of coping with these spills today, or are they just fewer of them? Or, where do things stand on that level?

DOWDESWELL: Well, I think there's a greater consciousness about the important safety elements among the shipping industry. I think that's part of it. I think the oil industry is also now well aware of the dangers in their day-to-day offshore activities. But I think the international community has also come together. There are guidelines, there are standards

through the International Maritime Organization that in fact not only keep a watchful eye on what's going on but are very, very quick to respond.

LITTLEJOHNS: How serious is the problem of refrigerant gases now? And the effect on the ozone of these gases?

DOWDESWELL: Well, we're coming to a wonderful turning point in that the Vienna Convention and the Montreal Protocol are going to be celebrating their tenth anniversary this year. This is a wonderful example of the international community taking the best of science, the best of technological solutions, and the political will to really try and make the future better. Many developed countries will have phased out their production and in some cases use of chlorofluorocarbons in 1997, and some ahead of schedule. The developing countries have had a grace period, and they now are moving even much faster than we anticipated. The resources and the technologies are slowly being transferred to the developing world and we really are making progress. But these gases have a very long residence time in the atmosphere, and consequently it's going to be many years before we actually see a return to the ozone layer of years past.

LITTLEJOHNS: So the ozone layers in the Arctic and Antarctic are likely to increase in area?

DOWDESWELL: We anticipate that for several more years we will see a deepening and a thinning of the ozone layer until -- but we do know that the junk that we are sending up into the atmosphere is in fact being reduced.

NGUYEN: You talked earlier about a life cycle for environmental issues. In the past three years, for example, since the Rio Conference on the Environment, have you detected any loss of interest by governments? And when the issues have become the bottom of the priority of the agenda of governments?

DOWDESWELL: One of the wonderful things about a conference like Rio is that it sharpens the interest of decision-makers to do something. When there is no imminent deadline, or no event in front of them, very often other things take most importance on their agendas. And I think that has happened to some degree. Unfortunately, the interest in the environment coincided with some economic downturn, and consequently we have not seen progress that is as fast and as widespread as many of us would have liked. I think it's very important to keep the pressure on.

NGUYEN: But since '92, have you seen any really disinterest by governments to care about the environment?

DOWDESWELL: I think there has been a lessening of interest by some governments, but as I said at the beginning, I don't think it will ever disappear from the scene. We know, for example, that there is a much higher level of interest and involvement

at the level of municipal, local governments than has ever been the case. We have hundreds of stories of cities who have taken the Agenda 21 that came out of Rio and developed their own municipal action plan. And, in fact, that must be where much of the action takes place. How people use energy in a city, what they do with their wastes -- these are critical problems for their local environments.

LITTLEJOHNS: So local governments are actually ahead of national governments in some cases in awareness.

DOWDESWELL: In some parts of the world. Very much so.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you think that national governments should therefore -- well, I presume that you agree that national governments should therefore take their cue from local governments and adopt laws which are going to affect the entire country?

DOWDESWELL: Well, I think that if we are to make real improvements in our environments, and if we're to bring about sustainable development, we have to involve more than governments. National governments are one answer -- they do one thing, they set the ground rules. But we have to deal with local governments, with average citizens, and certainly with the private sector. That's where some of the real gains are to be made.

FASULO: Has there been much private sector investment? Has it declined, or is it growing, or where do things stand?

DOWDESWELL: I think it's growing. And I would use as an example the discussions that we have been having with the financial services sector, with the commercial banks, with the insurance companies. When we first started talking to them, I thought that their interest would primarily be, "How do we make our own operations green? How do we minimize waste? How do we reduce energy costs?" and so forth. But they are very quickly moving on to discuss things like credit risk liability, and finally moving to -- some of them -- moving to the issue of their whole investment portfolios. How can they know that what they are putting good money into is in fact going to be sustainable, from an environmental perspective? While that's still just a handful of companies, it's a very important sign that we are talking to some of the right people. Because if we can mobilize the capital markets, if we can really influence financial decision-makers, we stand a much greater chance of making a long-lasting impact on environmental change.

NGUYEN: Talking about finance, I remember we heard you asked for billions of dollars to save the environment. How much would it cost in terms of dollars to save the marine environment?

DOWDESWELL: Well, I think there are some things that will not be costly, that just require good planning and changes in practice, and there will be things that are costly. We know that in parts of the developing world the issue of sewage treatment, for example, is still

a very big issue, and there are infrastructure costs associated with that. But I believe that we should be influencing the multilateral development banks to be able to put their money into those sound projects, projects that are sound for the environment.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Dowdeswell, I don't think we've spoken about recycling. Is UNEP doing anything in that area to encourage areas to adopt recycling programmes, particularly in the developing countries, where perhaps they do not have such programmes at this time?

DOWDESWELL: Very much so. The recycling industry is alive and well in many parts of the world. But the real thrust now is to what we would call cleaner production processes. Our work with industry out of our industrial office in Paris, for example, is moving away from what we would call end-of-pipe solutions -- how do we clean up things after it's happened? -- to really helping businesses and industries look at the processes that they have in place, the design of what they're doing, right at the start, for their own bottom line as well as for what's good for the environment. So it's a real shift from the end-of-pipe solution to cleaner production processes and products right from the outset.

FASULO: Can I ask you which legal instruments would you say are most effective in terms of sort of getting countries to clean up the environment?

DOWDESWELL: Well, the one I like to use most of all is the Montreal Protocol, to deal with substances that deplete the ozone layer. I like to use it for three reasons. One is because we can see that it's a success, and that's always an advantage when you're trying to cause people to change their behaviour. But secondly, it's one of those instruments that, while based on science, was flexible enough that it could change over the years, so that as we learned more about the science, as we learned more about the possible solutions, we were able to change the legal instrument. It wasn't covered in stone. And the third reason is because it is one instrument that is not just the purview of governments. We involved business and industry right from the outset, and they were part of defining the problem, understanding it, and developing the technical solutions. So it's one of the best examples we have of the real inter-dependence of all of the actors.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Dowdeswell, we have less than a minute left. If you were asked -- in fact, I'll ask you: What is the most serious environmental problem at the present time? Is there one particular problem which really exercises UNEP and makes you say, "God, we've got to do something about this, otherwise all our efforts are going to be in vain."?

DOWDESWELL: I think there are three problems. Very quickly, the one that concerns me most in the long term is climate change. I really believe that we need to be very cautious about what we're doing now to make sure that we're not going to leave quite

an uninhabitable world for future generations. Secondly, what we're doing to our water, and particularly the whole concept of a sharing of our resources. I believe that we are in real danger of having global conflict over the management of water resources in the future. And thirdly and finally, for many of the developing countries the issue of land resource management, desertification, is going to be a factor in whether or not they have enough food to eat.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Dowdeswell, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme. She was interviewed by Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International and Linda Fasulo of NBC News. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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